

BREAKING

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Were 1998 Memos a Blueprint for War?

By ABC News

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March 10 -- Years before George W. Bush entered the White House, and years before the Sept. 11 attacks set the direction of

his presidency, a group of influential neo-conservatives hatched a plan to get Saddam Hussein out of power.

The group, the Project for the New American Century, or PNAC, was founded in 1997. Among its supporters were three Republican former officials who were sitting out the Democratic presidency of Bill Clinton: Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz.

In open letters to Clinton and GOP congressional leaders the next year, the group called for "the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power" and a shift toward a more assertive U.S. policy in the Middle East, including the use of force if necessary to unseat Saddam.

And in a report just before the 2000 election that would bring Bush to power, the group predicted that the shift would come about slowly, unless there were "some catastrophic and catalyzing event, like a new Pearl Harbor."

That event came on Sept. 11, 2001. By that time, Cheney was vice president, Rumsfeld was secretary of defense, and Wolfowitz his deputy at the Pentagon.

The next morning — before it was even clear who was behind the attacks — Rumsfeld insisted at a Cabinet meeting that Saddam's Iraq should be "a principal target of the first round of terrorism," according to Bob Woodward's book *Bush At War*.

What started as a theory in 1997 was now on its way to becoming official U.S. foreign policy.

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Some critics of the Bush administration's foreign policy, especially in Europe, have portrayed PNAC as, in the words of Scotland's Sunday Herald, "a secret blueprint for U.S. global domination."

The group was never secret about its aims. In its 1998 open letter to Clinton, the group openly advocated unilateral U.S. action against Iraq because "we can no longer depend on our partners in the Gulf War coalition" to enforce the inspections regime.

"The only acceptable strategy is one that eliminates the possibility that Iraq will be able to use or threaten to use weapons of mass destruction. In the near term, this means a willingness to undertake military action as diplomacy is clearly failing. In the long term, it means removing Saddam Hussein and his regime from power," they wrote, foreshadowing the debate currently under way in the United Nations.

Of the 18 people who signed the letter, 10 are now in the Bush administration. As well as Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, they include Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage; John Bolton, who is undersecretary of state for disarmament; and Zalmay Khalilzad, the White House liaison to the Iraqi opposition. Other signatories include William Kristol, editor of the conservative Weekly Standard magazine, and Richard Perle, chairman of the advisory Defense Science Board.

According to Kristol, the group's thinking stemmed from the principles of Ronald Reagan: "A strong America. A morally grounded foreign policy ... that defended American security and American interests. And understanding that American leadership was key to not only world stability, but any hope for spreading democracy and freedom around the world."

Pushing for a More Assertive Foreign Policy



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